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WAR NOT INEVITABLE

BY HON. JOHN W. FOSTER,
Ex-Secretary of State.

I have been asked to speak on the topic, "War not inevitable," and to illustrate it from the history of our own country.

At the very threshold of the consideration of such a subject the question presents itself. It is reasonable to expect peace among the nations of the earth, and is it practicable to maintain such peace? I fear that the prevailing answer to these questions would be in the negative. Among even the most enlightened and Christian nations there is not a predominant sentiment that war is not only inevitable, but that sometimes it is necessary.

The substitute for or preventive of war, arbitration, is held to be merely a method of adjusting minor international differences, and it is contended that political questions involving national policy, honor, or territory should not be relegated to a tribunal however exalted, but that in the extreme resort they must be determined by the arbitrament of war.

Besides, there are many who claim that war is not an unmixed evil; that it stimulates patriotism; that it makes men more virile; that it reduces a redundant population; that it is a healthy stimulus among nations; that decay and disintegration are the fate of nations which do not maintain a state of preparedness for war.

Writers of the history of nations, the chroniclers of wars, and most statesmen are inclined to take one or more of the foregoing pessimistic views of the relations of states to each other. An Englishman, one of the most intelligent writers on questions of the Far East, the recent storm center of war, in a late work on "The Coming Struggle in Eastern Asia," uses this language: "The sterilization besotten of a long peace is as much the nemesis of a nation as the valing of a Napoleon who threw himself to the other extreme. Moderation in war and moderation in peace is the line along which the successful nation must necessarily progress. It is impossible to conceive of a world presided over by international lawgivers, such as is the strange ideal of some. To succeed in realizing such dreams it would first be necessary to emasculate mankind. War is necessary to mankind. All history shows it to be inevitable."

A senator of the United States, one of the most prominent and influential members of that high legislative body, was recently approached with a view to securing his cooperation in a movement for the establishment of a permanent international tribunal of arbitral justice, such as was proposed at the last Hague Peace Conference. The report to me of the gentleman who conferred with the senator is as follows: "The senator pooh-poohed the idea of a permanent, judicial, and binding court of arbitration. He said the war expenditures were trivial (except pensions, which cannot be touched), and the United States would never agree to refer questions involving the honor or territory of this country to any court of arbitration that the people would never tolerate such a suggestion for a moment."

Do this British author and this American statesman represent any considerable body of public sentiment among the Anglo-American peoples? If so, the friends of international peace have a serious task before them in converting the English-speaking world to a policy of peace and goodwill among the nations. Our history shows that war is popular with the masses of our people. The conduct of our legislators and public men in times of controversy with foreign governments has been largely controlled by their knowledge that the great body of the people would approve heartily a call to arms. Hence the important work before us is to seek to create a strong public sentiment hostile to war. It is apparent that at present it does not exist in our country.

Let us examine the assertions that war is inevitable and sometimes necessary. We have been accustomed to look upon the contests of past ages as inspired by the spirit of conquest or entered upon under trivial pretexts and without reason, to satisfy the whims of autocratic or ambitious rulers; but that since the nations of Europe and America have assumed the form of constitutional and representative government they have not appealed to arms except for alleged grave reasons of state involving the honor and high interests of the countries concerned. The United States, since it attained its independence, has been in three foreign wars. There were entered upon under the constitutional requirement of an express vote of Congress. It may throw some light upon the subject we are discussing if we inquire how far these three wars were inevitable or necessary.

I premise by saying that the Revolutionary War was a revolt from the mother country, and therefore does not fall within the category of foreign wars; and yet, if the controversy which occasioned it had arisen in the

last quarter of the nineteenth century in place of the eighteenth, there would have been no necessity for it. More than fifty years ago, when there was considerable agitation in Canada for independence or annexation to the United States, the London Times, reflecting the sentiments of the government and people of Great Britain, used this positive language: "We have been taught wisdom by experience, and the most valuable as well as the most costly of our lessons has been taught by the barren issue of a conflict with a province which from remoteness drifted to rebellion and crowned rebellion with insubordination. We should not purchase unwilling obedience by the outlay of treasure or blood." Should Canada today, resolutely and with a fair degree of unanimity, determine to set up an independent government, it would meet with no armed opposition from Great Britain.

The War of 1812, our first foreign conflict, was far from being inevitable. While it was justifiable, according to the rules of international law, the better sentiment of the country was opposed to it. The President, Mr. Madison, did all in his power to prevent it, but he was overruled by a few fiery spirits in Congress known as the "War Hawks." Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, then young men, being the leaders who played upon the sentiment of hostility at that time so fresh against England. The declaration of war was passed by Congress after a long and heated debate, a large minority vote being cast against it. Five days after this action, but unknown in America owing to the slow means of communication, the Orders in Council were repealed, and thus the main cause of the war was removed.

The fateful decision had been made, and Mr. Clay, the leader of the war party, predicted the conquest of Canada and that we would dictate peace at Quebec or Halifax. But our armies crossed the frontier only to be driven back in defeat, and though we gained some glory on the water, the conflict was barren of results, and we made peace without settling a single question about which we entered on the contest. Never was a war more fruitless in its conclusion. It was neither inevitable nor necessary.

It is the judgment of history that our second foreign war—that with Mexico—was provoked on our part, and that it was largely inspired by the spirit of slavery extension. Although the annexation of Texas, a revolted colony of Mexico, led to the armed contest, the immediate cause of the conflict was a disputed question of territory. Our government at the same time had a similar territorial question on our northwest coast with Great Britain even of a more heated character. The party which elected Mr. Polk to the presidency had declared for "fifty-four forty or fight," that is, we must contend at the hazard of war for our extreme claim against England. But just then the British had concluded a war with China, and had a strong army and a formidable navy, which could be sent at once to the dispute. Under such circumstances our government prudently decided to make terms with England, and surrendered our claim to more than half of the territory in dispute.

Our contract with our weaker neighbor on the south was in marked contrast. Without waiting for the result of negotiations, President Polk, with no authority from Congress, sent an army under General Taylor to occupy the disputed territory, and thus precipitated a war which, as I have said, in the judgment of historians, almost without exception, has been pronounced not only unnecessary but unjustifiable. A book has recently appeared which is written with a view to reverse this judgment but it furnishes new proofs to sustain the judgment, in the declaration of President Tyler, who brought about the annexation of Texas, that "the question of boundaries was purposely left open for negotiation," which he expected would be adjusted "by pacific arrangement," and he accused his successor of having precipitated war by advancing Taylor's troops to the Rio Grande. Although the results of the war were greatly to the advantage of the United States, that does not change the fact that it was provoked on our part and was one of conquest and injustice.

The Civil War was domestic, not international, in its character, and hence not to be included in our present examination, but may be remarked in passing that, though possibly the questions of the right of secession and the continued existence of slavery could not have been settled in the existing state of public sentiment except by a resort to arms, yet how much more economical it would have been to have purchased peace by paying the full value of every slave emancipated; and how many thousands of lives would have been saved, the wretched experience of reconstruction days have been avoided, and the bitterness and hate engendered by the fearful contest never have been created.

The war with Spain possessed some of the characteristics of that of 1812 with Great Britain. The President was strongly opposed to a resort to arms and struggled for peace to the last, but the feeling in Congress and the agitation in the press called loudly for hostilities. I entertain no doubt that the Spanish government would have granted at the end of the negotiations the demand of our government for the complete colonial autonomy of Cuba and practical independence such as Canada enjoys. But the ill-timed catastrophe of the explosion of the Maine in the harbor of Havana seemed to cause our people to lose their reason and led the President to intrust the issue to Congress, where it was hastily decided.

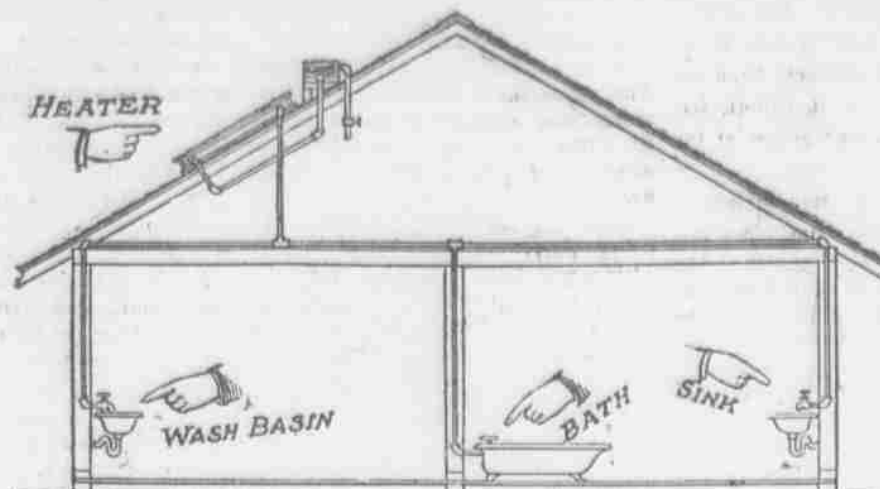
The cause of the destruction of the Maine has not yet been accurately ascertained. The Spanish government proposed that the question be submitted to an international court of inquiry, but our government declined the proposal, preferring to rely upon the report of our own navy officials. From my acquaintance with the Spanish people I have never been able to bring myself to believe that the catastrophe was caused by Spanish officials, or with their knowledge. There has been an almost criminal neglect on our part to raise the Maine whose wreck lies as an unsightly obstruction in the harbor of Havana, with the festering bodies of many scores of gallant men denied a soldier's burial. From my conversation with officers of high rank in the navy, I am inclined to the belief that our delinquency in this respect is occasioned by the fear that it would be found that the destruction was caused by an internal explosion, and that the war was precipitated by an event for which the Spanish government was in no wise responsible.

The Maine disaster was not the declared object of the war, but the independence of Cuba; and diplomacy to that end had not exhausted its resources when Congress took action. President Taft has recently declared it to have been an altruistic war. That is true, but how far one nation is justified in imposing upon another through its army and navy its ideas of political morality and government is an open question. Our experience with Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines in the last ten years has presented to us in a new light some of the embarrassments Spain had to contend with in the government of those islands, and has created a division of sentiment among us as to the wisdom of assuming responsibility for their government. But it is historically correct to assert that the war was forced upon Spain by us, and that it might easily have been avoided with honor.

The Spanish War has demonstrated the evil effects of an aggressive war, entered upon without proper deliberation, under the whip and spur of undue public excitement. If before that war was declared Spain had offered to transfer to us the island of Porto Rico for one fourth or one fifth of the cost of that war, we would not have accepted the offer. We would have said that the island was of little or no strategic importance, and would be an element of weakness rather than strength to our continental territory; that the people were without experience in government, without sympathy with our institutions, of different race, language, and religion, very ignorant and of a low grade of morality, a people whom it would require generations of time to assimilate with us; that, so far from shedding one drop of American blood for their acquisition, we would find the island a constant expense and incubus, and we should have declined even its free gift. Much less would we have accepted the Philippines on the other side of the globe, if offered us before the war, for one half of the hundreds of millions which it cost us, with a population even more objectionable than that of Porto Rico, largely pagan and Mohammedan, a territory which would be an element of weakness in time of war and a heavy expense in peace.

So, too, it might have cooled the warlike ardor of many an American taxpayer to have been told that the war upon which we were about to enter would end in the permanent enlargement of our military establishment, that our navy would seek rivalry with the greatest nations of Europe, and that our annual expenses for military purposes would amount to seventy-two per cent of the entire government expenditures. These considerations, with others of a like nature, if they had been properly and calmly examined by the people of the United States, might have led our Congress to delay, if not forego, the acts which inaugurated the hostilities against Spain. We never can tell to what extremities a foreign war may lead us.

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